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Serving the System: a critical history of distance education

JENNIFER SUMNER
University of Guelph, Canada

ABSTRACT *When analysed through the critical lens, distance education has a long history of serving the system at the expense of the lifeworld. Using Jürgen Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action as a powerful learning paradigm to diagnose problems and envision cures, this paper looks at the history of distance education in terms of its ability to foster communicative action. It concludes that most forms of distance education have served the system. However, computer conferencing carries the potential for the interactivity that enables communicative action, but does not guarantee it. Only the value choices of distance educators willing to stand up against the system in this era of corporate globalisation can ensure that they make the 'learning turn' and serve the lifeworld.*

Introduction

> It is impossible to deny, except intentionally or by innocence, the political aspect of education.
>
> (Freire, 1976, p. 70)

Although its beginnings are disputed, the history of distance education is well documented, especially in the 20th century. However, most historical analyses of distance education do not take a critical stance, but tend to heroise its beginnings and endorse its current trends (Holmberg, 1989; Keegan, 1990; Sweet, 1989; Verduin & Clark, 1991; Willis, 1993). This paper will look at distance education through a critical lens, using Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action to analyse its history and inform its options for the future.

A number of factors make such an analysis timely. With millions of students enrolled worldwide, the market for higher education through distance learning has been estimated at US$300 billion (Kingston, 1999) and is growing. Technology is rapidly changing and decisions are needed to guide its use in the field. And as governments around the world withdraw funds from education, distance education takes on greater appeal to cash-strapped universities as a source of instant financing. In short, we find ourselves in a time of crisis and opportunity. A critical look at the history of distance education can provide insight and understanding to help us choose the path of opportunity.

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Although a great deal has been written about the practice of distance education, scholars in the field are calling for more theoretical work, especially as a way to 'understand the broader social and historical contexts through which open and distance education is transformed' (Evans & Nation, 1992, p. 3). In addition, Collins (1991, p. 99) argues that

> more critical analysis is needed to assess the homogenizing effects of distance education and its potential as a delivery system to serve governmental and large scale corporate interests rather than those of people in their community settings.

Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action, as a powerful learning paradigm for diagnosing problems and envisioning cures, can respond to these calls for more critical and theoretical work, and be an effective tool for analysing historical developments.

Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action

Jürgen Habermas is a second-generation member of the Frankfurt School, a group of philosophers who adopted a form of German social theory known as Critical Theory. Unlike other members of the Frankfurt School, Habermas grounded his Critical Theory in a paradigm of language based on dialogue. This dialogical move allowed him to propose the concept of communicative rationality to counter what he saw as the instrumental rationality that was turning the world into a 'thoroughly commodified and totally administered society' (McCarthy, 1984, pp. xx–xxi).

For Habermas, communicative rationality:

> is contingent, not on the ability of a claim, or course of action, to exact control of the world (instrumental rationality), but on whether or not discourse participants agree that it is valid.
>
> (Collins & Plumb, 1989, p. 98)

Linked to these two kinds of rationality are two modes of action in the world: the first, based on instrumental rationality, is ends-oriented action, involving either instrumental action to influence the external world, or strategic action to influence people; the second, based on communicative rationality, is process-oriented action, involving the attainment of ends through a process of reaching an agreement based on mutual respect and understanding (Connelly, 1997). The second mode of action is what Habermas calls communicative action.

According to Habermas (1984, p. 86):

> The concept of communicative action refers to the interaction of at least two subjects capable of speech and action who establish interpersonal relations [whether by verbal or by extraverbal means]. The actors seek to reach an understanding about the action situation and their plans of action in order to coordinate their actions by way of agreement.

Habermas's pathbreaking distinction between instrumental rationality and communicative rationality laid the groundwork for a new understanding of Critical Theory,

an understanding that encompasses his concept of the correlatives of instrumental and communicative rationality: system and lifeworld.

The lifeworld is a complex structure that is symbolically produced and reproduced through the medium of communicative action (McCarthy, 1984). Based in grammar, norms and values, it 'forms the horizon of processes of reaching understanding in which participants agree upon or discuss something in the one objective world, in their common social world or in a given subjective world' (Habermas, 1984, p. 131). In other words, the lifeworld reproduces the culture, social integration and processes of socialisation necessary to the continuation of society (Connelly, 1997). For Welton (1993, p. 87), the lifeworld is where everyday practice and everyday communication occur. He defines it as the 'background consensus of our everyday lives', quoting Pusey's description of it as 'the vast stock of taken-for-granted definitions and understandings of the world that give coherence and direction to our everyday actions and interactions' (Welton, 1995, p. 141).

Habermas contends that the lifeworld is engaged in a complicated and potentially destructive relationship with the system, which 'has to do with the economy, coded as money, and the state administrative system, coded as power' (Welton, 1993, p. 87). Whereas consensus is 'normatively guaranteed or communicatively achieved' in the lifeworld, social intercourse is 'largely disconnected from norms and values' in the system (Habermas, 1987, pp. 150, 154). Unlike the lifeworld, which is reproduced through communicative action, the system involves either instrumental or strategic action. According to Welton (1993, p. 87), 'people in command positions in systems use a form of reason that represses human norms and values ... in a largely coercive, anticommunicative way'.

Mezirow (1995, p. 61) describes 'the difficult dialectic between the "system"—the socio-economic system which provides employment and security in exchange for loyalty—and the "lifeworld", which is characterised by reflective discourse, consensual validation of beliefs, human rights and responsibilities, and interpersonal relationships'. Although this 'difficult dialectic' can have two results, either the system can come to serve the lifeworld or the lifeworld can come to serve the system, the latter case now predominates.

Because of its paradigmatic analysis of system and lifeworld, Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action allows us to understand the effects of the system on the lifeworld, effects that can become what Habermas (1987, p. 325) calls 'the colonization of the lifeworld'. In other words, the system can eliminate the opportunities for communicative action that both build and reinforce the lifeworld.

In terms of application, Best and Kellner (1991, p. 239) see the Theory of Communicative Action as 'a conceptual scheme whereby one can diagnose pathologies of the "lifeworld" (such as its colonisation by the system of money and power) and provide cures (for instance, an increase in communication, social participation, and discussion of values and norms to reconstruct society)'.

Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action is not without its detractors. Both feminists (Hart, 1992) and postmodernists (Briton, 1996) maintain that it relies too heavily on rationality. Feminists (Fraser, 1995) also contend that his theory is gender blind. And some educators (Young, 1990) argue that it is not applicable to

education. While such criticisms carry some weight, his theory is dynamic enough to meet them. For example, a number of feminists have found his paradigm to be a powerful tool (Meehan, 1995), and other educators (Collins, 1991; Connelly, 1997; Welton, 1995; Young, 1990) find Habermas's work to be liberative and useful.

Indeed, Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action has far-reaching implications for education because, in essence, communicative action:

> describes an ideal, though conceivably achievable, group learning experience where participants put forward their own views on the problem at hand, listen carefully and respectfully to those of others, and seriously examine all relevantly identified information introduced to the situation. It does not take the form of a debate, or the mere weighing of pros and cons. The process is more rational and democratic—a kind of on-going, thoughtful, conversation .... It entails a predisposition towards decision-making processes where all participants are engaged in rational discourse that emerges from a genuinely democratic situation.
>
> (Collins, 1991, p. 12)

The 'on-going, thoughtful conversation' that characterises communicative action reflects the mutual respect and understanding that can be achieved in many educational situations. Communicative action is problem-based, participatory, dialogical and action-oriented. In this way, it can counter instrumental forms of education that emphasise one-way, top–down, authoritarian communication.

Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action provides a critical framework for understanding the history of distance education. Its positing of a dialectical relationship between system and lifeworld, and its understanding of what builds or colonises the lifeworld, allow us to ask two important questions:

- whether distance education has served the system or the lifeworld throughout its history; and
- which choices will be made as we enter the 21st century.

Within the context of an increasingly globalised economy, this paper investigates these two questions by critically examining the history of distance education. The fact that such an investigation has not already been carried out helps to answer the first question: many of those involved in distance education have consciously or unconsciously served the system. To reverse this value choice, the answer to the second question must be actively chosen by distance educators appalled by the changes in the world around them and willing to stand up for the lifeworld against the system *par excellence*—corporate globalisation. Distance educators can begin to make choices to build the lifeworld by increasing, wherever possible, the opportunities for communicative action, or they can continue to serve the system at the expense of the lifeworld by preserving the traditional isolation of distance students and by promoting the professionalising, individualising and personalising trends of the field, which support the demands of strategic action. Although in practice the choices distance educators face are never so clearly delineated, posing

these distinctions in stark opposition will help us better understand the implications of the choices we make every day.

This paper begins with a critical examination of the role of technology in distance education. Within this term of reference, the history of distance education is then divided into three generations: correspondence study, multimedia distance education and computer-mediated distance education. Each generation is assessed for its ability to enable communicative action and build the lifeworld. This paper concludes that most forms of distance education have served the system, but that computer-mediated distance education through conferencing has the potential to foster the interactivity that grounds communicative action. However, its mode of use remains a value choice for distance educators who are committed to building the lifeworld.

The Role of Technology in Distance Education

For clarity, this critical look at the history of distance education will be divided into three sections that correspond to Nipper's (1989) three generations of distance education, which are 'linked historically to the development of production, distribution and communication technologies' (p. 63). Like an extended family, each new generation in the history of distance education does not automatically eliminate the previous one, but exists alongside it, with the potential for mutual reinforcement.

Technology has always had an intimate relationship with distance education because it mediates the separation between teacher and learner through the use of print, radio, telephone, television, audio and videotapes, and computers. This relationship, moreover, is taking on a heightened importance because of technology's growing range and accessibility, lower costs, greater ease of use, expanding pedagogical power and increasing political and social cachet (Bates, 1993).

Given this new importance, it becomes paramount to distinguish between the roles of different types of technology. The basis for this distinction lies in the creation of an institution of the lifeworld that Habermas (1987) calls the public sphere, composed of communicative networks within society at large (as opposed to the other institution of the lifeworld, the private sphere of the nuclear family). Although the public sphere is used by the mass media as a way to legitimise the system (money and power), it is also the site for communicative action because of its communicative networks. Habermas (1987) distinguishes between two types of media of communication, which play different roles in the creation of the public sphere. The first type prevents communicative action by not providing opportunities for communicatively established consensus, while the second type ultimately makes possible the formation of public spheres where communicative action can take place. Thus, we see that the dividing line for Habermas is whether technology serves the lifeworld by creating public spheres that enable communicative action, or whether it serves the system by destroying that public space.

With this distinction in mind, we can differentiate between distance education technologies that involve primarily one-way communication (e.g. course units, videotapes, television, radio) and those that involve primarily two-way communi-

cation (e.g. telephone tutoring, videoconferencing, e-mail, computer conferencing). Two-way technologies not only allow for interactivity between teachers and learners, but also among distance students themselves (Bates, 1993). Interactivity involves the ability of the learner to respond in some way to the teaching material, and to obtain comment or feedback on the response, which considerably increases learning effectiveness. This interactivity, which can lay the foundation for the creation of the public space that enables communicative action, separates education from indoctrination. No amount of one-way technology can achieve such interaction. This distinction does not mean that there is no place for one-way technologies in distance education, but that they should supplement, not dominate, the distance education experience.

The distinction between one-way and two-way communication technologies has implications for distance education far beyond the technological.

> The question of production, distribution, and communication in distance teaching and learning is not merely a historical issue concerning the available technologies .... It is first of all related to the basic pedagogical, social, and institutional concepts of adult learning.
>
> (Nipper, 1989, p. 64)

While much of our traditional understanding about learning sees it as an individualised process, there is a growing body of literature that addresses the importance of social learning. Indeed, Nipper (1989, p. 66) argues that 'learning—although a very *personal* matter—must never be an individual matter—one learns best by and with others'. According to Daniels and Walker (1996), social learning involves the process of framing issues, analysing alternatives and debating choices in the context of inclusive public deliberation.

Social learning, however, cannot occur in isolation. The basis of social learning is communication, which Nipper (1989, p. 64) characterises as the degree of 'noise' accepted by the institution. For Nipper, the more communication there is with and amongst the learners, the more noise there is in the system. That noise is the sound of people coming together to learn. It also signals the interactivity that can enable communicative action. Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action lays the groundwork for understanding how to enable such social learning in a world that is becoming increasingly fragmented, individuated and alienated.

Technologically speaking, noise cannot occur in the first and second generations of distance education. In these generations of distance education, learning is not social, but individualised and considered 'the acquisition of the information given by the study material' (Nipper, 1989, p. 64). In comparison, Nipper's noisy learners are 'active and creative learners' (p. 71) who are involved in social learning through their interactivity.

As more and more institutions of higher learning turn to distance education as a solution to their funding problems and as distance universities make future technological choices, the question thus arises: will the technology chosen enhance social learning, or will it simply make the educational transaction more efficient by enhancing individualised learning?

Sussman (1997) adds some critical perspective to this question when he contends that technology is developed neither accidentally nor for the public good. He sees it as the embodiment of human decisions made at particular moments in particular political settings. He arrives at the same junction as Habermas when he states that the measuring stick of communication technology is how it benefits ordinary people. The bottom line for both is, who does it serve? As we will see in the course of this paper, both communication technology and distance education overwhelmingly serve the system.

A Critical History of Distance Education

> Education has always been subject to external pressures that seek to subordinate its practice and goals to vested interests of some kind, whether of slave-holding oligarchies, theocratic states, political parties or merely prevailing dogmas of collective belief. The history of the development of social intelligence is largely a history of this conflict between the claims of education and inquiry, on the one hand, and the demands of ruling interests and ideologies on the other (McMurtry, 1991, p. 209).

The history of distance education is no exception to the history of education in general. Torn between the claims of the lifeworld and the demands of the system, it has, on the whole, succumbed to system demands by precluding the interactivity that grounds communicative action. As communication technology has evolved, the possibilities for interactivity have increased. But the choices made have often involved the continued use of one-way technologies, which rule out the 'noise' that builds a vigorous and active lifeworld.

The First Generation: correspondence study

Although Keegan (1990, p. 94) reports that Sewart 'sometimes tries to trace distance education back as far as the epistles of St. Paul', and Willis (1994, p. 5) proposes that 'Itinerant wanderers delivering information by word of mouth were perhaps the world's first distance educators', distance education did not really begin until the rise of industrial society. By the end of the 19th century, it was well established in the form of correspondence study.

Correspondence study basically involves the use of print-based course materials and the postal service. Such one-way technologies all but preclude the creation of public space and interactivity that grounds communicative action to build the lifeworld.

The beginnings of correspondence study depended on the emergence of the same factors that contributed to the birth of adult education: adult literacy, the printing press, a publishing industry, mass-produced, low cost pens (Hamilton, 1990), and need—brought on by the demands of the Industrial Revolution for an educated workforce. To this list correspondence study would have to add the introduction of a cheap and reliable postal service, an efficient transportation system and, in some countries like Canada and Australia, large, sparsely populated areas.

In 1840, in England, Isaac Pitman offered the first recognised correspondence

courses in shorthand (Verduin & Clark, 1991), to aid in business administration. Later in the century, private correspondence schools in England and Europe began to offer such subjects as modern languages and preparation for university entrance examinations, which helped people rise up the social ladder. In 1873, Anna Eliot Ticknor, an early pioneer of American correspondence education, founded the Society to Encourage Study at Home, with a mostly female clientele (Holmberg, 1986), in step with an era that slowly began to support women's education.

By the end of the 19th century, a number of Canadian, American and European universities offered distance education courses, reflecting the growing public thirst for education. In the early part of the 20th century, 'correspondence study was flourishing with universities and private schools providing instruction to elementary, secondary, higher education, and vocationally-oriented learners' (Willis, 1994, p. 9). Portman (1978) describes how, in the United States alone, 48 institutions were offering doctorates by correspondence, some of such dubious nature that correspondence study gained a tainted reputation that took decades to erase. With so many sellers flooding the correspondence study market, not only private institutions, but also denominational ones were hard-pressed financially. In a grim foreshadowing of cash-strapped universities a century later, Portman adds that 'the possibility of additional income from non-residential students must have been a great attraction to more than one beleaguered president who was continually hustling for cash, books, and buildings to keep his institution alive' (pp. 33–34).

The British model of correspondence study was spread around the globe by colonialism and adapted to local needs. For example, in Australia, the introduction of mandatory childhood education created the need for more teachers, many of whom were educated by correspondence courses.

Countries with large immigrant populations, like Canada and the United States, developed forms of education to inculcate newcomers into the social, cultural and economic norms of the day. In 1882, in the United States, the Chautauqua movement pioneered correspondence instruction that influenced the development of distance education throughout North America. In Canada, citizenship education took on special importance, especially during World War II (Selman, 1983), blurring the lines between education and propaganda. And both countries developed agricultural extension programmes using correspondence courses to deal with a predominantly farming population, many of whom were completely new to the field of agriculture.

The Soviet Union used correspondence study to widen educational opportunities and combine study with productive work (Young *et al.*, 1980). In turn, East European countries adopted the Soviet prototype of adult schooling, including correspondence courses (Kulich, 1985). Linked to the student's work, these courses involved independent study and, often, consultation sessions, which were criticised as being more lecture than real consultation (Eklund *et al.*, 1993).

In addition to massive technological development, the two World Wars promoted the growth of distance education. The armed services demanded correspondence education for soldiers during World War I (Holmberg, 1986), and soldiers returning

from World War II looked to education, including correspondence study, as a way to change society after the horrors of the two World Wars and the Depression.

By the late 1950s, in Western countries like Canada, an economic recession, high unemployment and the realisation that the Soviet Union was the leader in space technology combined to produce a large-scale attempt to upgrade the competence of the workforce through education (Selman & Dampier, 1991), including distance education. But this upgrading did not include the vision of changing society that so many people carried through the war years and the Depression. In North America, for example, the Cold War and McCarthyism promoted professionalism (Ogilvie, 1996) through donations from philanthropic sources like the Carnegie Corporation, while encouraging the continued isolation of correspondence learners over the option of forming distance education learning groups. In other areas of the world, there were important exceptions to this trend. In Lesotho, and later in the Dominican Republic, for example, group learning was kept alive, providing 'an important clue to the future of distance learning' (Young *et al.*, 1980, p. 72).

Generally speaking, however, instead of harnessing education to social change, the aim was 'to leave to the individual learner the decision as to the use to which the newly acquired knowledge would be put' (Selman & Dampier, 1991, p. 231). The inevitable result is what Harris (1987) calls 'the ideology of credentialism' (p. 137), driven by the desire of various professional groups (including distance educators) to legitimise themselves, and by the educational institutions' need to find lucrative sources of income. Through this 'emerging narrow professionalism' (Selman, 1983, p. 16), education became more and more institutionalised, formalised, individualised and professionalised, all of which increasingly served the system.

In this individualistic, professionalistic guise, distance education was introduced in country after country so that it became known all over the world. Demand grew slowly, but steadily, especially after World War II, but correspondence study remained essentially unchanged until the late 1960s, with any new media introductions being treated as ancillary (Bates, 1991) to the correspondence process.

Although the capacity for limited two-way communication exists in correspondence study, it is very difficult to achieve because of the slowness of the postal process. Correspondence study is, ultimately, a very individualised mode of learning that tends to isolate and insulate students from group learning processes. In addition, 'by privatising the student experience, distance education serves to reproduce the "ghettoisation" of women in the domestic sphere, thereby contributing to their invisibility in the world at large' (Grace, 1994, p. 13). The result of such isolation and privatisation is a form of distance education that either consciously or unconsciously supports the system by its emphasis on individual education and fulfilment at the expense of learning communities that could form the basis of communicative action in support of the lifeworld. According to Spencer (1995, p. 94), such emphasis may explain 'the popularity of distance education amongst policy makers and "new right" politicians'.

This emphasis does not mean that the individualised form of correspondence study has no place in distance education. It can deliver education to the remote communities where many students live and work (Spencer, 1995). It can also form

a valuable part of the learning experience. But in order to foster communicative action in support of the lifeworld, the individualising tendencies of correspondence study should not take precedence over the emerging possibilities of group interaction and social learning, but should support them by providing examples that can form the basis of mediated group discussion.

The Second Generation: multimedia distance education

As new technologies developed, 'the term correspondence was felt by many to be too narrow' (Holmberg, 1989, p. 1), and 'distance education' became the designation of choice for education that was no longer simply tied to print material and the postal service. This second generation of distance education integrated the use of print with broadcast media, cassettes, and—to some degree—computers (Nipper, 1989). With the growth of new technologies, the opportunities for communicative action via two-way communication increased, but were often squandered by emphasising the quantity and seamlessness of production over the quality of the learning experience, especially group interaction and social learning.

Like the first generation of distance education, the main objective of the second generation has been:

> the production and distribution of teaching/learning material to the learners. Communication with the learners has been marginal, and communication amongst the learners has been more or less non-existent.
>
> (Nipper, 1989, p. 63)

Without the interaction to ground communicative action, this second generation has provided few opportunities to serve the needs of the lifeworld.

A number of factors contributed to the growth of the second generation of distance education: new communication technologies, growing sophistication in the use of printed materials, improved support services for distance students and the establishment in 1969 of the Open University of the United Kingdom (Keegan, 1990).

As the hallmark of the second generation of distance education, the Open University was a reflection of the time and place in which it arose, and an influence on numerous institutions in subsequent years. More than any other occurrence, its establishment was seen as 'the beginning of a more prestigious era in the history of distance education' (Holmberg, 1986, p. 30). Its combination of correspondence instruction, supplementary broadcasting and publishing, residential short courses, and support services at the local and regional levels modernised and revitalised the approach to distance education (Selman & Dampier, 1991). But did it increase the opportunity for communicative action?

The early multimedia course model of the Open University involved the use of one-way technologies—radio and television broadcasts, and audio and video cassettes. In addition, it has preponderantly specialised in print-based correspondence courses. Thus, in spite of the Open University's contribution to the move away from

'a selective toward a mass system of education' (Woolfe, 1977, p. 82) in the 1970s, such education did not help to build the lifeworld through communicative action. Since the early 1990s, the Open University has begun to embrace third-generation, distance teaching technologies, and in this sense is in the process of changing its teaching systems. However, the extent to which this change will actually serve the lifeworld as opposed to the system is in doubt.

In spite of the accelerating development of new educational technologies, the vast majority of distance education throughout the world at the end of the 1980s was still primarily print-based (Bates, 1993). The use of radio and television for distance education engendered a 'cult of the expert', which led to the professionalisation, legitimation, commodification and instrumentalisation of certain forms of knowledge. Such a conception of knowledge rules out the kind of knowledge that is built through people learning together to build the lifeworld. Like the first generation of distance education, this generation also promotes system-serving forms of distance education, including professional accreditation, military training and human resource development.

Therefore, although the second generation of distance education carries the potential for communicative action because of its two-way communication possibilities (e.g. teleconferencing), it wastes this potential by concentrating on one-way communication, expert knowledge, mass marketing and student independence. All in all, like the first generation of distance education, the second generation has served the system, not the lifeworld.

The Third Generation: computer-mediated distance education

The beginning of the 21st century finds us deep in the information age—what Noble (1995) refers to as the second Industrial Revolution. In the first Industrial Revolution of the 19th century, the context of the economy shifted from homes and household workshops to factories and offices; now it is shifting to the infrastructures of the information highway (Menzies, 1996) and back to the home. The harbinger of this second Industrial Revolution—the vehicle of this so-called knowledge-based economy—is the computer.

The information highway has made inroads into almost every facet of Western life, including distance education. But in many ways its vaunted promise merely masks the way education is being used to achieve student conformity and adaptation to dominant ideology (Spencer, 1998). By creating a dependency on technology and by incessantly repeating the necessity of acquiring the skills needed for the so-called knowledge-based economy, such an education becomes education to serve economic purposes, not social purposes.

Within this knowledge-based economy, McMurtry (1998) argues that no questions are asked, or encouraged, about the difference between knowledge and non-knowledge, not even by the academic world. While the 'primary movement and obligation of all knowledge are to *overcome partiality towards a more comprehensive taking account* … this requirement of all truth-seeking is in systematic conflict with seeking above all to maximize profits for corporate shareholders' (p. 187). In this

way, the tension between the needs of the lifeworld and the needs of the system is clearly exposed, especially as more and more multinational corporations get into 'the education business'.

Distance education's traditionally individualised learning experience is continued in the information age by the use of the Internet and the World Wide Web. Modular coursework, self-paced quizzes, CD-ROM and linked websites may add to a student's information overload, but do nothing to provide the vital interaction so necessary for dialogue, social learning and communicative action. But one aspect of the information age holds out the prospect for interactivity and public space—computer conferencing.

There is no doubt that computer conferencing is fraught with issues like access, power and self-confidence. In terms of access, Spencer (1998, p. 124) mentions the 'tendency to closure' in distance education. For example, the increased use of computer conferencing results in greater student interaction, but only for those who have the equipment and skills to participate. His view is echoed by Denny (1999, p. 14), who points out that 'among the hype for everything online it is easy to forget that 80% of the population of the world has never even used a telephone, let alone sent an email message'. Rumble (1995, p. 19) brings up the power question when he contends that 'technology is the excuse for, rather than the cause of, the distribution of power between managers and workers'. Kirkup (1996) presents feminist concerns with respect to power and computer conferencing. And Nipper (1989, p. 67) notes that computer conferencing 'may cause experiences of personal defeat, frustration, and educational inadequacy'. Without diminishing these important issues, this paper concentrates on the potential for communicative action that computer conferencing enables.

The development of computer conferencing as a two-way technology has the potential to change the field of distance education by fostering the conditions for communicative action. Garrison (1997, p. 3) sees computer conferencing as a technology that 'has the potential to support learners in collaboratively constructing meaning and confirming understanding'. Mason (1992), in describing computer conferencing as a form of written, electronic interaction between people, refers to it as a unique phenomenon in the history of human communication. Computer conferencing began tentatively, but grew exponentially until now it is used, for example, with both on-campus as well as off-campus courses at universities.

Although this third generation of distance education carries the potential for building the lifeworld through communicative action, it is in its infancy, with many choices and opportunities, and many uncertainties. At this point, it is important to remember that history is not on the side of education for the lifeworld. Like the other technologies that preceded it, computer technology is more likely to control teachers and learners than to serve them (Menzies, 1994). Critical theorist Herbert Marcuse (1969) anticipated this control when he stated that technology serves to institute new, more effective, and more pleasant forms of social control and social cohesion. In spite of this ominous precedent, computer technology can provide us with a unique opportunity in the history of distance education to create the

conditions that foster communicative action—groups of people learning together to build the lifeworld.

One of these conditions is the character of computer conferencing itself. Rather than replicating the conventional classroom, Garrison (1997, p. 4) argues that computer conferencing 'represents a very different approach to the educational transaction'. In terms of communication potential, he contends that there is a 'qualitative difference between real-time verbal and asynchronous written communication'. For Garrison, written communication's reflective and precise nature is very different from oral communication's spontaneous and less structured nature.

The development of written communication skills in computer conferencing has far-reaching implications for higher order learning. Garrison (1997) points to the relationship between written communication and cognitive development, citing White's statement that 'writing as an advanced skill becomes both the means and the expression of critical thinking and problem solving' (p. 4). In contrast, so-called 'interactive' one-way technologies like CD-ROM may introduce students to yet more information, but do nothing to foster the critical skills needed for analysing that information. All in all, authoritarian, one-way, top–down, content-driven coursework does not promote the cognitive development that is the hallmark of higher education.

Although Habermas's Theory of Communicative Action is based on real-time verbal communication, asynchronous, written communication can also be the basis of communicative action, especially given its ability to support reflection, critical thinking, cognitive development and problem solving. Harris (1987, p. 142) would seem to agree with this position when he contends that while the obvious medium for communicative action is face-to-face contact, 'it is the content of the discussions that count, their range and scope, and the lack of constraint'. Boyd (1991) is more direct when he contends that computer-mediated teleconferencing may be a medium through which Habermas's ideal discourse conditions can (very nearly) be met. In computer conferencing, groups of people can practice reflection, critical thinking and problem solving, and use them to begin to address the colonisation of the lifeworld in their own communities.

Thus, the development of computer conferencing systems provides the opportunity for the interactivity via two-way communication that is the foundation of communicative action. But will that opportunity be taken or will it be directed to serve the system at the expense of the lifeworld?

Discussion

The essence of an education that builds the lifeworld is the group learning experience that characterises communicative action. Communicative action is a two-way process that can take place face to face or, *with differing levels of efficacy*, through the media of text (correspondence tutoring), audio (telephone tutoring or audioconferencing), television (interactive television or videoconferencing) and computing (e-mail or computer conferencing). Communicative action cannot occur with one-way communication—course units and supplements, audio and videotapes, and radio

and television programmes. Such one-way technologies leave little room for communication in the true sense of the term—communication as emancipative, non-dominative discourse designed to promote understanding (Boyd, 1991).

Menzies (1996) contends that post-industrial society can and should be inclusive and participatory, just and democratic—truly an information and knowledge society. She maintains that the high capacity multimedia technologies associated with the information highway could open the way to an inclusive, participatory knowledge society. Computer-mediated communications, as part of the information highway, are unique in their options for flexible, intimidation-free, norm-respecting participation (Boyd, 1989). As one form of computer-mediated communication, computer conferencing can contribute to this vision of a better society by fostering the communicative action that helps people find their voice and build the lifeworld that supports such a society. In this way, distance education could be a part of building the lifeworld instead of continuing to work against it.

However, in this information age, distance education exists within a larger context, corporate globalisation, described by Ratner (1997) as a world system in which powerful, interconnected, stateless corporations nullify national boundaries and incorporate whole societies as cost-effective sites of production. Within this corporate context, distance education becomes a business opportunity, not only for cash-strapped universities, but also for multinational corporations.

Jarvis (1993) explains that within a capitalist economy, any commodity produced is an object that can be sold, including distance education materials. Campus-based universities hire marketing managers to sell these commodities and expand the market beyond the university itself, which makes the distance education package 'a more attractive marketable commodity' (p. 168). Thus, the emphasis is on supporting the system through the mass marketing of predominantly one-way course materials, not on enhancing the lifeworld through finding ways to provide an interactive educational experience.

Jarvis (1993) adds that the capitalist market is based on competition. Theoretically, only the best commodities survive, but in practice, only the strongest and largest organisations outlast this competition, regardless of the quality of their commodity. In terms of distance education, this means that those institutions that cannot compete successfully in the capitalist market will lose out and be forced to close, regardless of the quality of their courses. Thus, for Jarvis, the large universities will get larger at the expense of the smaller ones, with successful niche marketing by smaller universities eventually meeting the same fate. Once again, the system will be served, not the lifeworld, and even the most noble aspirations of distance education will be transformed into ensuring institutional survival.

As the market becomes global, so does distance education, influencing educational institutions around the world. In the face of stiff global competition, distance universities find they must 'push the pace' (Kingston, 1999, p. 19) and press ahead with on-line courses, while advocating for 'the multimedia mega-university' (Daniel, 1999, p. 24). Jarvis (1993) wonders what effect corporate globalisation will have on small, indigenous universities of poor Third World countries, and whether globalisation might not also lead to accusations of cultural imperialism, with distance

education being a 'vehicle for a kind of cultural invasion' (Collins, 1991, p. 99). Will such neo-colonialism control the development of distance education not only in Third World countries, but also in the former Soviet republics?

In this way, the larger context of corporate globalisation promotes system-serving forms of distance education. Distance educators become more interested in advertising and sales, and alliances with corporations, than in establishing interactive educational environments where students can learn their way out of community problems. Huge multinationals like Disney, Microsoft and Time–Warner are currently exploring links with a number of American education institutions to create teaching materials for distance learning and to supply the technology to deliver them around the world (Kingston, 1999). Will such corporatised distance education allow a space for building the lifeworld, or will it 'only represent the educational companion to economic globalization' (Spencer, 1998, p. 115)? Before we put our faith in such commercial interests, Moore (1997, p. 4) quotes Ruggiero and Sahulka (1994) to remind us that:

> Behind all the hype shaping the electronic highway are corporate interests. They want to find markets that will give them very lucrative rates of return .... They take their own set of aims, doctor them up, and present them as the aims of the entire society.

It is important to note that computer conferencing within such a corporate context does not guarantee communicative action; it only provides the potential for it. In other words, communicative action in distance education can occur with computer conferencing, but the technology does not inevitably and unalterably create that result. Computer conferencing can serve the system by being closed, circumscribed, non-exploratory and hierarchical, or it can serve the lifeworld by being open-ended, wide-ranging, democratic, participatory and 'noisy'. In this information age, distance education will diverge along these two pathways: the one retaining the system-serving approach to education that values high volume delivery over interactive learning processes, the other exploring the possibilities for building and sustaining the lifeworld that values social learning over corporate profits for private stockholders.

Knowing that we even have such a choice is the first step to making it.

Conclusion

The history of distance education has been, by and large, more than a century of serving the system, which strengthens its ability to colonise the lifeworld through privatisation, individualisation, rationalisation, militarisation and professionalisation. But at the turn of the century, an opportunity for building the lifeworld through distance education opens up with the development of computer conferencing. This does not mean that the interests of the system cannot also be served, but they must not predominate. The enhancement of the lifeworld should be the priority when making educational decisions.

According to Garrison (1997, p. 9), 'computer conferencing has the potential to radically reshape learning at a distance'. It offers the opportunity of providing a collaborative ideal that can facilitate communicative action to counter the vicissitudes of corporate globalisation. The challenge now for distance educators is to understand this technology and apply it to create new and more effective learning situations.

'Although technologies can be combined, world-views cannot' (Garrison, 1997, p. 9). At this stage in the history of distance education, distance educators are faced with a clear value choice—whether to serve the system or the lifeworld. Evans and Nation (1993) have described this value choice in their book, *Reforming Open and Distance Education* (p. 196):

> on one hand, there is a possibility that open and distance education will remain captive to 'educational technologists' with behaviourist orientations and become mass-produced forms of programmed learning in which students are essentially alienated from their teachers and fellow students or, on the other, there is the possibility of educators using technologies to create systems of teaching and learning which sustain dialogue between teachers and students who are separated in both space and time.

The selection and use of technology will reflect that value choice (Garrison, 1997). Distance educators can continue to serve the system, supporting multinational corporations, the military or administration, or simply maintaining the convenient isolation of distance students. Or they can actively begin to serve the lifeworld, empowering students to work together to solve community problems that threaten the basis of the lifeworld itself—such as clean air, fresh water, biodiversity, unadulterated food, health care, education, child/elder care and productive work. For the first time in the history of distance education, both choices are clearly available. Will distance educators continue to serve the system, or will they make the 'learning turn' and serve the lifeworld?

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Jennifer Sumner is a PhD Candidate and Sessional Instructor at the University of Guelph. She has been involved in distance education for over 15 years. Rural Extension Studies, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario N1G 2W1, Canada. E-mail: jsumner@uoguelph.ca

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